

❧XII❧

How Many Kinds of Military There Are and Concerning Mercenary Soldiers

Having discoursed in particular on all the qualities of those principalities which at the beginning I proposed to reason about, having considered in some part the causes of their well-being and ill-being, and having shown the modes in which many have sought to acquire and hold them, it remains for me now to discourse generally on the offense and defense befitting each of those named. We have said above that it is necessary for a prince to have good foundations for himself;¹ otherwise he must of necessity be ruined. The principal foundations that all states have, new ones as well as old or mixed, are good laws and good arms. And because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws, I shall leave out the reasoning on laws and shall speak of arms.

I say, therefore, that the arms with which a prince defends his state are either his own or mercenary or auxiliary or mixed. Mercenary and auxiliary arms are useless and dangerous; and if one keeps his state founded on mercenary arms, one will never be firm or secure; for they are disunited, ambitious, without discipline, unfaithful; bold among friends, among enemies cowardly; no fear of God, no faith with men; ruin is postponed only as long as attack is postponed; and in peace you are despoiled by them, in war by the enemy. The cause of this is that they have no love nor cause to keep them in the field other than a small stipend,

1. See Chapter 7.

which is not sufficient to make them want to die for you. They do indeed want to be your soldiers² while you are not making war, but when war comes, they either flee or leave. It should be little trouble for me to persuade anyone of this point, because the present ruin of Italy is caused by nothing other than its having relied for a period of many years on mercenary arms. These arms once made some progress for some, and may have appeared bold among themselves; but when the foreigner came, they showed what they were. Hence Charles, king of France, was allowed to seize Italy with chalk.³ And he who said that our sins were the cause of it spoke the truth.⁴ But the sins were surely not those he believed, but the ones I have told of, and because these were the sins of princes, they too have suffered the punishment for them.

I want to demonstrate better the failure of these arms. Mercenary captains are either excellent men of arms or not: if they are, you cannot trust them because they always aspire to their own greatness, either by oppressing you, who are their patron, or by oppressing others contrary to your intention; but if the captain is not virtuous, he ruins you in the ordinary way. And if one responds that whoever has arms in hand will do this, mercenary or not, I would reply that arms have to be employed either by a prince or by a republic. The prince should go in person, and perform himself the office of captain. The republic has to send its citizens, and when it sends one who does not turn out to be a

2. In the literal sense of “soldier”: in your pay.

3. The chalk used to designate which houses would lodge French soldiers along their unresisted invasion route; the expression is attributed to Pope Alexander VI by the French historian Philippe de Commynes in his *Memoirs*.

4. This was Savonarola in his sermon of November 1, 1494, who said that the French invasion was God’s punishment of Italy and Florence. See *Discourses on Livy* I 11, 45, 56 for more of NM on Savonarola, and I 21; II 18 on the sins of Italian princes.

worthy man, it must change him; and if he is, it must check him with laws so that he does not step out of bounds. And by experience one sees that only princes and armed republics make very great progress; nothing but harm ever comes from mercenary arms. And a republic armed with its own arms is brought to obey one of its citizens with more difficulty than is a republic armed with foreign⁵ arms.

Rome and Sparta stood for many centuries armed and free. The Swiss are very well armed and very free. The Carthaginians are an example of ancient mercenary arms; they were nearly oppressed by their own mercenary soldiers at the end of the first war with the Romans, even though the Carthaginians had their own citizens as heads.⁶ After the death of Epaminondas, Philip of Macedon was made captain of their troops by the Thebans; and after his victory he took their liberty from them.⁷ The Milanese, after Duke Filippo died, hired Francesco Sforza against the Venetians; when he had overcome the enemy at Caravaggio, he joined with them to oppress the Milanese, his patrons.⁸ Sforza's father, in the hire of Queen Giovanna of Naples, at a stroke left her disarmed; then, so as not to lose the kingdom, she was compelled to throw herself in the lap of the king of Aragon.⁹ And, if the Venetians and the Florentines have in the past increased their empire with these arms, and their captains did not thereupon make themselves princes but defended them, I respond that the Florentines

5. lit.: external

6. The Mercenary War at the end of the First Punic War, 241–237 B.C.

7. After Epaminondas's death in 362 B.C., Philip (who does not appear to have been a mercenary captain) became king of Macedon in 359 and occupied Thebes in 338.

8. The battle of Caravaggio took place in 1448; see NM's fuller account of Sforza's successful maneuver in *Florentine Histories* VI 18–22.

9. Muzio Attendolo Sforza (1369–1424); see *Florentine Histories* I 38.

were favored by chance in this case, because, of the virtuous captains whom they could have feared, some did not win, some had opposition, others turned their ambition elsewhere. The one who did not win was Giovanni Acuto.¹⁰ Since he did not win, one could not know his faith, but everyone will confess that if he had won, the Florentines would have been at his discretion. Sforza always had the Bracceschi¹¹ against him, so that each watched the other: Francesco turned his ambition to Lombardy, Braccio against the Church and the kingdom of Naples.

But let us come to what happened a little while ago. The Florentines took as their captain Paolo Vitelli, a most prudent man who from private fortune had secured very great reputation. If he had captured Pisa, no one would deny that the Florentines would have had to stay with him, because if he had gone over in hire to their enemies, they would have had no remedy; and if they had kept him, they would have had to obey him. If one considers the progress of the Venetians, one will see that they acted securely and gloriously while they themselves made war (which was before they turned to enterprises on land). With their own gentry and armed plebs, they performed most virtuously, but when they began to fight on land, they left this virtue behind and they followed the customs of wars in Italy. And at the beginning of their expansion on land, because they did not have much of a state there and because they were held in great repute, they did not have much to fear from their captains; but as they expanded, which was under Carmagnola,¹² they suffered an instance of this error. For when they saw he was most virtuous, since the duke of Milan had

10. NM's rendering of the name of the English mercenary captain John Hawkwood.

11. Mercenaries of Andrea Fortebraccio, also known as Braccio da Montone; see *Florentine Histories* I 38, V 2.

12. Francesco di Bussone, count of Carmagnola (c1380–1432); see *Discourses on Livy* II 18.

been defeated by them under his government, and when they learned on the other hand that he had turned cool toward the war, they judged they could no longer win with him because he did not want to, nor could they dismiss him without losing what they had acquired. So in order to secure themselves, they were forced of necessity to kill him. Then they had as their captains Bartolomeo da Bergamo, Roberto da San Severino, the count of Pitigliano,¹³ and such. With these they had to fear for loss, not for their gain, as then happened at Vailà: there they lost in one day what they had acquired with such trouble in eight hundred years. For these arms bring only slow, late, and weak acquisitions, but sudden and miraculous losses. And because with these examples I have come into Italy, which has been governed for many years by mercenary arms, I want to discourse on them more deeply, so that, when their origin and progress have been seen, one can correct them better.

So you¹⁴ have to understand that in recent times as soon as Italy began to repel the empire, and the pope gained much reputation in temporal affairs, Italy divided into many states. For many of the large cities took up arms against their nobles, who formerly, supported by the emperor, had kept them under oppression; and the Church supported the cities to give herself reputation in temporal affairs. In many other cities their citizens became princes over them. Hence, since Italy had almost fallen into the hands of the Church and a few republics, and since the priests and the other citizens did not have knowledge of arms, they began to hire foreigners. The first who gave reputation to this kind of military was Alberigo da Conio,

13. Bartolomeo Colleoni, commander of the Venetian troops at Caravaggio (1448); Roberto da San Severino, commanding in the war against Ferrara (1482–84); Niccolò Orsini, count of Pitigliano, commanding at the battle of “Vailà” (Vailate) in 1509. See *Discourses on Livy* I 6, 53; III 31.

14. The formal or plural you.

from Romagna.¹⁵ From his discipline came, among others, Braccio and Sforza, who in their times were the arbiters of Italy. After them came all the others who have governed these arms until our times. And the result of their virtue has been that Italy has been overrun by Charles, taken as booty by Louis, violated by Ferdinand, and insulted by the Swiss. The order they have held to has been, first, to take away reputation from the infantry in order to give reputation to themselves. They did this because they were men without a state who lived on industry. Having a few infantry did not give them reputation and they could not feed very many; so they were left with horse, and were fed and honored in tolerable number. And things came to the point that in an army of twenty thousand soldiers not two thousand infantry were to be found. Besides this, they had used all their industry to rid themselves and the soldiers of trouble and fear by not killing one another in battles but taking prisoners without asking ransom. They did not go against towns in the night; those in the towns would not go against their tents; around the camp they made neither stockade nor trench; they did not campaign in winter. And all these things were permitted in their military orders and discovered by them, as has been said, so as to escape trouble and dangers, so that they have led¹⁶ Italy into slavery and disgrace.

15. Alberigo da Barbiano, count of Conio, died in 1409; on his Company of St. George, see NM, *Florentine Histories* I 34.

16. *condotta*, a pun on the contract (*condotta*) by which a *condottiere* is hired.